



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Record Albatross Numbers Tallied at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge

The annual count of Laysan and black-footed albatross nests by volunteers at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge has been completed, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports numbers for both species have increased to the highest level since the count began in 1991. A total of 511,612 nests were painstakingly counted during a three-week period in December and January.

“We had a great group of counters who were incredibly hard-working,” said Dr. Annie Marshall of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pacific Islands office in Honolulu. “More nests meant more work, but it was extremely rewarding to see the numbers just keep rising.”

Though Midway Atoll consists of only 1,540 acres, it hosts the world’s largest populations of Laysan and black-footed albatrosses. The total number of nests counted this year by island are:

	Acres	Laysan albatross nests	Black-footed albatross nests	Totals
Sand Island	1,200	277,732	12,606	290,338
Eastern Island	334	207,369	11,461	218,830
Spit Islet	6	2,426	18	2,444
Totals	1,540	487,527	24,085	511,612

“We are particularly pleased to see an increase in the number of black-footed albatrosses,” said John Klavitter, the refuge’s wildlife biologist. “This marks the fifth year of increased numbers of black-footed albatross nests on Midway after fairly steep declines in the 1990s.”

Since it is impossible to count individual birds, the volunteers are assigned sectors on all three islands in which they count active nests. They move in a line through each section with a mechanical counter and an inverted paint can, using it to make a tiny dot of orange paint beside each active nest. The total number of nests multiplied by two represents the total breeding population, in this case, more than 1 million adults. A 50 percent multiplier is used to approximate the number of albatross on the atoll, since many unmated birds return to Midway to practice their courting ritual and eventually find a mate for life.

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This year's 21 volunteers came from as far away as Minnesota and included representatives from Oregon, California, and Hawaii. Each year, seasoned albatross count veterans are paired with newcomers to ensure consistent results. "Though the volunteers miss the holidays at home, they tell us their Midway experience more than makes up for it," Klavitter explained. "Some of the folks here this year were on a waiting list for 3 years to come to Midway."

In addition to the albatross count, the volunteers were responsible for a vegetation sampling project and helped remove invasive ironwood trees. The purpose of the vegetation sampling is to help determine the impact of invasive plants such as *verbena* on albatross nesting. That work is continuing through the end of January. Volunteers helped pull ironwood seedlings and cut down small trees from the northern and western shores of Sand Island to restore albatross nesting habitat. Originally introduced in the early 1900s as a windbreak, ironwood trees spread over large areas of the island. Trees adjacent to the airfield runways were removed for safety reasons, and current efforts are to control their spread into new areas.

As the volunteers return to their homes, the albatross chicks are hatching at Midway. The first black-footed albatross chick was spotted on January 16 near the west beach and the first Laysan albatross chick 4 days later in the town area. Most of the chicks will have hatched within the next week or so.

"I'll miss seeing the chicks, but we had an incredible experience," said Marshall. "You're living in the birds' natural environment, surrounded by their music and dancing. They aren't afraid of people, and accept us as part of their community. It's always hard to leave."

The 2005-6 count is the sixth complete assessment of Midway's nesting albatrosses in the last 14 years. Though numbers have fluctuated somewhat from year to year, the previous record nest counts were 441,178 Laysan albatross nests in 2003 and 21,645 black-footed albatross nests in 1996. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature identifies 17 of 21 species of albatross as being at risk, including black-footed and Laysan albatrosses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.